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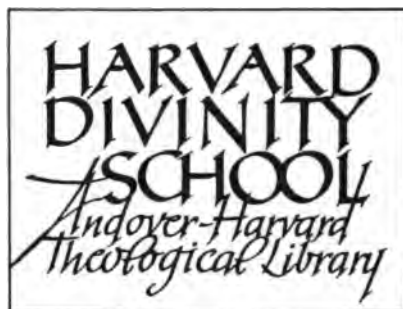
A
DISCOURSE
ON THE
LIFE AND CHARACTER
OF
REV. EZRA STILES GANNETT, D. D.,
DELIVERED IN THE MEETING-HOUSE
OF THE
FIRST PARISH IN HINGHAM,
On SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 1871.

BY
CALVIN LINCOLN.

PRINTED BY REQUEST.

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Lincoln.

DISCOURSE.

"BE THOU FAITHFUL UNTO DEATH, AND I WILL GIVE THEE A CROWN OF LIFE."—REVELATION II: 10.

THIS is our Savior's promise to his loyal and devoted friends. He assures us that no true life can prove to be a failure, since within itself are the germs of ever-enduring, ever-increasing blessedness and glory. For as the Christian's affections are directed toward God, the object of his highest love, so through the influence of an active faith, he is ever seeking and receiving supplies of strength and wisdom from an exhaustless fountain. Thus the life on earth becomes a preparation for the life immortal. The graces here imperfectly acquired under the impulse of a consecrated spirit will qualify the soul to receive new accessions of light and strength, when we shall be freed from the impediments of earth, and shall be introduced to the holier companionship, and larger opportunities of the

heavenly state. How full of instruction and encouragement is this assurance of our religion. How plainly does it disclose the work required of every individual; showing that the results of our efforts will be measured, not by the talents committed to our keeping, not by the field in which we have labored, not even by the amount of good which we have actually accomplished in the world, but by the fidelity with which our special work has been undertaken and executed. In this word faithful or full of faith how much is implied. What confidence in God and his divine word to the soul; what faith in goodness; in its intrinsic worth, in its never ceasing vitality. And again, what sedulous care, what constant watchfulness to discover our failures and learn our duties, what prayerfulness of spirit, trust in God for light and guidance and strength—how habitually and lovingly must the faithful disciple lean upon the Savior—resting in his promises, studying his sinless character, seeking to breathe more of his spirit, to accomplish more of his work. Yes, friends, the faithful Christian is true in all relations, faithful to God and Christ, to the cause of truth and the interests of humanity, in the home and in the world, in the church of God, in his secular engagements and his civil obligations. Entering on this life of faith, he endures to the end. The heart

that is consecrated to Christian service by faith is confirmed in its chosen life by a blessed experience. All have not by nature, education or opportunities equal powers for usefulness in the world. To some a wider, to others a more limited sphere of labor is assigned. But in every station, ability is the measure of duty, and all are equally required to be faithful, and thanks be to God, faithfulness is equally possible to all, and he who is loyal to the end, will receive a crown of life. Such is the great inspiring lesson of my text. How urgent the appeal which is addressed to every soul. May God give us wisdom to heed his voice, and since no one knoweth the time of his departure, may constant fidelity in our appointed sphere of activity, prepare us to pass on at any moment from the duties of earth to the more glorious life of Heaven.

The great truth suggested by my text, which, as I was able, I have tried to unfold, came at once to my mind as the only fitting introduction to a notice of the life and character of one, among whose many gifts and shining virtues and winning graces, fidelity to conscience and to duty shone pre-eminent. It can never be unsuitable nor unprofitable on the Lord's day in a religious service to contemplate the character of a truly Christian man. The strength of his convic-

tions may persuade us to study with new interest that gospel which commanded the full assent of his clear and penetrating intellect, and his example of humble reliance on the mercy revealed in Christ may incline our hearts to a closer alliance with that Savior through whom alone he found the way of approach to the Father for grace and strength. I have thought it right that I should speak to you of one whom I have known most intimately for more than fifty years, between whom and myself no shadow of alienation or distrust ever arose to impair our mutual confidence, or to disturb the deep satisfaction known in the freest fraternal intercourse. He was also your friend—interested in your welfare as a society, and earnestly desiring to see you evincing the fruits of a genuine Christian faith. You remember how in past years he occasionally led your devotions, and in words of thrilling power spoke to you from this pulpit—certainly you cannot have forgotten how entirely he entered into the spirit of the occasion, when with rejoicing hearts we re-entered and re-dedicated this house of worship. As I approach the service which I could not refuse to attempt, I am awed by its difficulty. To do justice to the mind and heart of our departed friend requires a keenness of intellectual vision, a power of exact discrimination,

a rich vocabulary and a choice selection of words, such as he, with very few others, could always command—I do not know that I have sufficiently recovered from the shock occasioned by his sudden removal and the awful circumstances by which it was attended, to speak, with any good degree of method and clearness, of his life and character.

EZRA STILES GANNETT was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, May 4th, 1801. His parents were persons of great respectability and earnest Christian piety. His father was a native of Bridgewater, a graduate of Harvard College, for three years a Tutor in that institution, and was ordained in this house as a minister of the gospel while Dr. Gay was the pastor of this church. Later in life, Mr. Gannett was chosen Steward of the University. This office he held at the time of his decease. He was a man of strong mind and of a devout spirit. The mother of Ezra was the daughter of the Rev. Dr. Ezra Stiles, at one period a Congregationalist Clergyman in Newport, Rhode Island, and for many years the very distinguished President of Yale College. Dr. Stiles possessed gifts of the highest order. He was regarded as a very learned man, and a very humble Christian. His daughter, the mother of our friend, was a woman of

unusual mental activity, of a fertile imagination, of a peculiarly benevolent temper, and fervent piety. The home established and conducted by such parents must have fostered, in a child of quick perceptions and affectionate disposition, a taste for intellectual culture, for literary pursuits, for offices of benevolence, and for services of devotion. The impressions which he received in this opening period of existence, were, without question, influential in giving prominence to the more distinguishing features which marked his future character.

My acquaintance with the subject of this notice commenced in 1816. We were members of the same class in college. In due time our acquaintance ripened into an intimate friendship, which, as I believe, death will have no power to dissolve. He soon became one of the most distinguished scholars in our class, and, on graduating, was universally acknowledged by his associates and by the Faculty to deserve the highest honor, that of delivering the English Oration. During his academic course he was always regarded as a young man of unexceptionable moral character, of high purposes, and of a generous heart. Three years from this time we had completed the prescribed course of study in the Divinity School connected with the University, and on the 30th of June, 1824, he was

ordained Colleague Pastor of the Federal Street Church in the City of Boston. The earlier period of his ministry was a season of peculiar trial to a young man of honorable ambition and of a sensitive nature. The elder Dr. Ware remarked to me at the time, whoever accepts that office takes his life in his hand.

Dr. Channing was now regarded as the *great preacher* of the denomination. He was expected to occupy the pulpit for the entire morning service. Crowds gathered to listen to his fervid eloquence, and to be uplifted by his spiritual conceptions of the higher truths of our religion. But the frailty of his health made his anticipated appearance in the pulpit extremely uncertain, and, not unfrequently, his young associate was unexpectedly summoned to address, as his humility led him to believe, a disappointed congregation. Thus situated, his powers of body and of mind were taxed to their utmost capacity. That he did sustain himself under these circumstances, gaining constantly on the love, the confidence and the respect of his congregation, affords the most trustworthy evidence of his powers and of his faithfulness. Dr. Channing, with his accustomed magnanimity, repeatedly assured his people that his own preaching, at the same age, was less able and less profitable than that of their junior minister.

With declining health, Dr. Channing gradually retired from official services, and in 1842, the year of his decease, Mr. Gannett became the sole pastor of one of the largest and most intelligent societies in the City of Boston. Highly educated men and women, persons of refined taste and of distinguished talent were constant attendants on his ministry. He commanded their respect and won their love. He gave himself to his work with an undivided heart. Into this work, he threw his life, with unreserved self-consecration. And while families in large numbers were removing to residences in neighboring towns and cities, and at distances remote from their former place of worship, his parish presented an instance of strength and unanimity seldom witnessed under the same circumstances. The variety and severity of his labors, united with the vehement action of his emotional nature, gradually shattered a frame already enfeebled by a disease from the effects of which he never entirely recovered.

It is more than one year since he proposed to resign his ministerial office, because he believed himself unequal to the labors which it imposed. As a proof of the estimation in which he was held, by those who best understood his worth, his parish, while releasing him from his official labors, insisted that he

should retain his pastoral relation, and receive his accustomed salary. His self-distrust, and his fear of being unjust to others, would not allow him to accept more than one-half the amount which their ideas of justice and their love for a faithful minister would have cheerfully furnished. Released from responsibility, and resting from all severe labor for more than a year, his system gradually regained a portion of its former vigor; and, during the last few months of his life, he frequently occupied a vacant pulpit, with the highest satisfaction to his hearers, and with genuine pleasure to himself. He especially enjoyed these services, because they were labors of love.

One week yesterday, he was on his way to Lynn, to fulfil an engagement for the following day, when he was suddenly removed from this to a higher sphere of existence. I need not mention the circumstances of his death, but only add, that as I looked upon his countenance, calm and placid in its repose, and remembered his past suffering, and his probable suffering in the future, had a few years been added to his life, I could not but think that death to him, with no consciousness of pain, was a most gracious ordination of Providence; for it seemed to me that he had been caught away from us in a chariot of fire, and translated from earth to Heaven without knowing the pangs of death.

At the time of his decease, Dr. Gannett was the oldest pastor among the one hundred and eighty ministers in the City of Boston. He was universally honored for his extraordinary intellectual gifts and for his acknowledged Christian virtues. The distinguishing characteristics of his mind were vigorous thought, clear perceptions and rapidity of action. Blessed with a strong memory and fertile imagination, he could summon his powers into immediate use. He was not distinguished above many others for the large number of volumes which he had studied, page by page, slowly making himself master of their contents. The multiplicity of his engagements, the constant demand made upon his time rendered this course impossible; but he had the rare faculty of seeing all the important points in a new book by glancing at its several chapters. In this way he would seize at once on its purpose, its method and its conclusions, and astonish his friends by the soundness of his judgment as to its real value. Hence his pre-eminence in discourses and arguments delivered with no written preparation. When strongly moved by the subject before him or the occasion which required the utterance of his convictions, it seemed as if his logic was more close, his discriminations more exact, his language more choice, and his argument more

comprehensive and conclusive, than in his written compositions. As an extemporaneous speaker, I think it generally conceded that very few were his equals in any department of public life in our country.

From these intellectual gifts, I proceed to notice with deeper satisfaction the marked virtues of his character as a minister of Jesus Christ. He loved the profession which he had chosen, its studies and varied duties; and he was thoroughly faithful in meeting its demands. He never entered the pulpit to give utterance to crude and unconsidered thoughts, to vague conjectures, to half-formed opinions, to arguments which he had not carefully weighed. His mind was always active. The subjects which he discussed had been carefully studied; hence his sermons, though written with great rapidity, were in no proper sense of the word immature productions. They were filled with valuable truths expressed in simple but choice language; often-times containing passages of extraordinary power, and figures and illustrations of unsurpassed beauty. As a pastor his faithfulness never forsook him. His conscientiousness would allow him to omit no effort by which he could minister to the welfare of his people. His determined purpose and strong will enabled him to surmount the obstacles arising from a diseased body and failing

strength, which many would have thought an adequate excuse for inactivity. He would brave the fierceness of the storm, the freezing cold of winter and the oppressive heat of summer, and force himself over long distances from his home, if by so doing he could speak words of comfort and hope in the dwellings of the bereaved, or at the bedside of the sick and dying. He gave himself to every form of service by which he could instruct or persuade, counsel or comfort the immortal beings whose spiritual education had been committed to his charge.

He was keenly sensitive to the claims of justice and honor. In public meetings he not unfrequently encountered opposition to the opinions which he advanced and the measures which he advocated. On such occasions, he would accept of no advantage that was not fairly secured. If any considerable number appeared to misunderstand his views, and, for this reason, to give him their support, he would be the first to inform them of their mistake.

Had I time and strength to do so, I should rejoice to speak of his great hospitality. He was never happier than when his table was crowded with guests, and he had received to the shelter of his home some friendless brother, — of his disinterested labors in behalf of the suffering poor whose only special claim

on his charity and his time was found in their common humanity,—of his great humility,—of the sometimes painful distrust with which he reviewed his past life, and examined the motives which had influenced his conduct. But I must proceed to speak of his Christian faith. In earlier life, he had thoroughly examined the great question: Is Christianity from Heaven or of men? Is it a communication of truth, a system of mercy, proceeding from the Infinite source of all truth, or a product of man's intelligence and virtue. On this question he was undisturbed by doubt. He believed firmly in Christianity as a divinely given revelation, as an authoritative rule of faith and practice. In this question his interest never ceased. And while he was scrupulously just to the motives and characters, he most sincerely deplored the position of those among us, who deny the genuineness and authenticity of the books of the New Testament. He was strongly attached to those doctrines which to his mind were the truest exposition of the Savior's teachings. He loved Unitarianism, as received in the earlier years of his ministry; but unspeakably dearer to his heart was the Gospel itself, for here he found those soul-moving disclosures which are specially suited to the needs and dangers of our erring, sinning humanity. In this view, he was confirmed both by his personal experience

and by all that he witnessed among all classes of society during his protracted ministry. Therefore he could not but lament the representations of those who reduced our religion to a mere system of ethics, and who failed to recognize its life-giving power in the conversion of the soul to God.

Dr. Gannett was a firm believer in religious institutions and in Christian ordinances. He believed them in the highest degree serviceable in maintaining the order and peace of society, and as providentially instituted means of grace for the spiritual nurture of the individual soul.

For these reasons, he was earnest in urging others to support the public worship of the Lord's day, and careful, under all circumstances, that his own practice should conform to his expressed opinions.

Such were some of the marked features in the character of this distinguished servant of the Gospel—this humble Christian and true friend. I have sought to avoid the mere language of eulogy, and endeavored to present,—as I was able—a delineation of his character, just as it now rises before my own mind. On earth he has finished his course,—accomplished his work,—and he was faithful to the end. I now think of him as already awakened to a consciousness of the new life to which he was so suddenly

transferred. He never repeated the petition "to be delivered from sudden death," but daily prayed "to be saved from death unprepared for." In this particular his life-long prayer was answered. Though we can no more see his face and listen to the appeals of his earnest eloquence, we can treasure up in our hearts the memory of his virtues, the great lesson of his life. I know that no words of praise from our lips would so fill with joy his loving soul, if he could still behold those whom he knew on earth, as to see us moved by the contemplation of his character,—to become more conscientious in duty,—more faithful in the cause of truth, and more disinterested in the service of our fellow-men.



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